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Teaching Students "At-Risk"

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https://cedar.wvu.edu/wwu_honors/212

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Date 5/08/13

Very special thanks to Professor Saunders for her support and enthusiasm, and my mother for her support and enthusiasm.

This research paper completes partial fulfillment of the WWU Honors Program

Teaching Students “At-Risk”

Elie Hartman

5/1/2013

Very special thanks to Professor Saunders and Dr. Mariz for their guidance, Professor French for her support and enthusiasm, and my mother Ann Hartman for her edits.





The United States is facing catastrophic drop-out rates of one student every twenty-nine seconds, or one million per year (Governors Association in the United States, as cited in Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2010, p. 38). These are the students who are categorized as “at-risk”: students who live in poverty, are homeless, are Black or Hispanic, do not speak English as their first language, or face other barriers, from mental disabilities to broken families, that might make them likely to drop out of school, commit crimes, and end up on the streets or prison. Despite so many of these youth dropping out of America’s schools, there is much that individual teachers can do to help these students succeed. This research is meant to be a resource for all current and future educators who teach these students, whether there is only one “at-risk” student in the class or thirty.

More specifically, this paper is a resource for teachers of secondary students. Study after study cites the importance of reaching at-risk children when they are young, when their brains are forming and when they are most impressionable. Because the correct interventions are clearly not being implemented for these young children in the capacity needed, the burden is shifted to the teachers of students in middle and high school. Much can be done to reach these students, and indeed it is the duty of teachers to be educated and to effectively teach these youth. As teachers, we must use all our power and resources to keep these students in school “because it may provide the only opportunity for stability in a life filled with constant change and uncertainty” (Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997, p. 90). With the correct training and attitudes, educators can be the turning point for America’s “at-risk” youth.





Diversity and Poverty in Schools

Public schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. Students who do not speak English as their first language (referred to as English as a Second Language students





(ESLs) or English Language Learners (ELLs)) “make up a significant percentage of our nation’s school population,” with “nearly 3 million ESL students” in 2005 (Shore, 2005, as cited in Howard, Dresser, & Dunklee, 2009, p. 6). In addition, “Blacks, Hispanics, and children from a wide array of Asian and Middle Eastern culture now make up nearly half of students nationwide” (p. 6). Diversity, of course, is not the cause of students dropping out of school. Rather, the above-mentioned demographics “are the dominant majorities in many of the schools in low-income neighborhoods” (p. 6). The following graphs display not only the sheer numbers of people who live in poverty in the United States and Washington State but also the disproportionate amount of people of color who live in poverty in comparison to Whites.

United States	Percent	0% - 100%
White	13%	
Black	35%	
Hispanic	33%	
Other	23%	





(Poverty rate in the United States by ethnicity; www.statehealthfacts.org, 2011)

Washington	Percent	0% - 100%
White	12%	
Black	41%	
Hispanic	29%	
Other	22%	

(Poverty rate in Washington State by ethnicity; www.statehealthfacts.org, 2011)

United States	Number	0 - 25,865,700
White	25,865,700	
Black	12,876,400	
Hispanic	17,134,700	
Other	5,442,400	

(Number of individuals in the United States who live in poverty; www.statehealthfacts.org, 2011)

Washington	Number	0 - 4,950,700
White	566,200	
Black	75,800	
Hispanic	226,700	
Other	232,400	

(Number of individuals in Washington State who live in poverty; www.statehealthfacts.org, 2011)

Note that more White individuals live in poverty in the United States than any other ethnicity, yet a much higher *percentage* of people of color live in poverty in comparison. While there may be a greater percentage of poor White students in schools, a greater proportion of students of color are at risk for school failure due to their poverty status.

The following table then shows similar information with a focus on individuals under the age of 18:

Table 3. Poor Children in America: A Portrait

	Number Who Are Poor (thousands), 2010	Percent Who Are Poor	
		2010	1973
All Persons Younger than 18	16,401	22.0%	14.4%
White	10,492	18.7	n/a
Black	4,362	39.1	n/a
Asian	474	14.4	n/a
Hispanic (may be any race)	6,110	35.0	n/a
White, Non-Hispanic	5,002	12.4	n/a

(2011 US Census Bureau, as cited by Children's Defense Fund, 2011, p. 12)

Table 5. Child Poverty by Race/Ethnicity, 2010

	Percent in Poverty		
	White, Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic
Washington	11.8	36.9	36.6

(2011 US Census Bureau, as cited by Children's Defense Fund, 2011, p. 14)

There is much, however, that the numbers do not reveal. While there are greater quantities of poor White children,

Black, Hispanic, and children of recent immigrants...are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods...[which is] not often the case with poor White children.

Research actually shows that in our largest metropolitan areas, very few White low SES [socio-economic status] children (4%) live in poor neighborhoods, while nearly half of Asian low SES children and the vast majority of Black and Hispanic low SES children do. (Harvard Public Health, 2007, as cited in Howard et al., 2009, p. 6)

According to McKinney, Flenner, Frazier, and Abrams (2006),

The effects of family poverty are exacerbated when there is a high concentration of low-income families and individuals in the neighborhood. Known as 'collective socialization,' depressed attitudes and motivation may be accepted as normative, thereby reducing urban children's expectations and hope for the future, and success in school. (as cited in Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 27)

Although the statistics show that there are many more White children living in poverty, the negative effects of poverty are often more extreme for many non-White students due to the high concentration of those living in poverty in poor neighborhoods.

Before going further, one must understand that the effects and causes of poverty are different for every family and individual. As decided by Paul Gorski (2008), "there is no such thing as a culture of poverty. Differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people" (as cited in Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, the effects of poverty do not apply to all students equally, and students must always be taught as individuals, no matter their circumstances.

Effects of Poverty

It is simple to see how many poor families and individuals live in America, but knowing the numbers tells teachers nothing about why these low SES students are often at-risk for dropping out of school and being involved in violence and drugs. Starting at a young age, poverty has enormous effects. Lee (2002) compared kindergarteners from the 5 richest communities and those from the 5 poorest. Children in the poorest communities

- owned 38 books compared to 150 of their richer counterparts
- were read to three or more times per week 30% less than more affluent children
- spent 18 or more hours per week watching television compared to 11 hours or less
- were less likely to have seen a play or participate in the arts (Howard, 2007, p. 21-22)

In addition, “one in three children enters kindergarten not ready for school” due to the effects of poverty listed above (Howard et al., 2009, p. 8). Fewer books results in less access to literacy, and more time watching television leads to less time speaking and interacting with other people to increase vocabulary. The academic and social distance between students in kindergarten only grows as students move through school. Other negative effects of poverty include:

- less time with parents due to parents having multiple jobs
- difficulty taking turns due to living moment to moment (known as “survival mode”) rather than on a schedule
- busy and unavailable parents leading to lack of educational resources and encouragement for learning
- absent parents resulting in no bed time or regular meals (Howard et al., 2009, p. 31)

The National Education Goals Panel (1997) cites further effects:

- unhealthy physical well-being and development
 - such as poor nutrition and no or few immunizations
- poor social and emotional development
 - including lack of confidence, inability to form friendships, or to work independently or in groups
- impaired language use
 - which includes speaking, listening, drawing, and communicating thoughts and feelings
- poor cognition and knowledge
 - including understanding of patterns, relationships, cause and effect, and problem solving (as cited by Howard, 2007, p. 42-43).

Race

While it is generally accepted that “poverty is a factor that affects achievement...*race is a larger factor*” (Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 7, emphasis in original). For example, according to the 2001 US Bureau of the Census, “African American and Latinas/Latinos with four or more years of college are respectively 83 and 61 percent more likely to be unemployed than comparable whites” (Johnson, 2006, p. 59). Because people of color are generally less accepted in society, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that “in a study of low-income Black students in Washington, D.C., high schools...many Black students rejected success as a ‘White’ behavioral norm” (Kuykendall, 2004, p. 113). Kuykendall suggests teaching students of all backgrounds (specifically Blacks and Hispanics) that “success is *definitely* a part of the Black and Hispanic experience” (p. 114-115, emphasis in original). She suggests that teachers should be celebrating Black History Month every day, not just in February, and highlighting achievements of all ethnic groups in all subjects to show the success of people of all backgrounds throughout history. While teachers cannot erase the societal pressures that prevent people of color from being employed equally among Whites, they can encourage students to stay in school and want to succeed instead of giving up or rebelling.

Low SES Students and Special Education

In addition to students of low SES facing lack of food and safety at home, they risk being labeled as learning disabled. A specific learning disability is defined as follows by the Fairfax County Public Schools (2004):

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to

listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations... (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 9)

Children who enter school with lower abilities in reading, writing, and expression than his or her peers may have a learning disability or may live in poverty and not have access to books, conversations with adults, or other intellectually stimulating toys. Therefore, there is a danger in confusing low school readiness with learning disabled.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) "requires students are educated in the least restrictive environment" (Howard, 2007, p. 25). Least restrictive environment, or LRE, means a child who has disabilities is educated in the mainstream classroom with students who are typically developing. If the child cannot succeed in that environment, then he or she is moved to a new setting or is given an aide, which is more restrictive than being in the mainstream classroom unaided. If a child is categorized as having a learning disability when she is actually not achieving at the same rate as other students due to poverty or other life experiences, then the child would not only wrongly be placed in special education but would not be educated in her LRE if she is not in the mainstream classroom 100 percent of the time.

Similarly, the "1987 McKinney Act...ensures all children who are homeless the same right to a free and appropriate public education [FAPE] as children whose families have permanent housing" (Yamaguchi et al., 1997, p. 90). Much like preventing students from learning in their LRE due to false labeling, incorrectly referring homeless students to special education due to low school readiness or low academic abilities due to their poverty is a violation of the McKinney Act because students may be prevented from receiving FAPE.

Any child can be wrongfully labeled as having a learning disability, but students of color and those who live in poverty are more likely than middle- to upper-class White students to be mislabeled. For example, “between 1997 and 2004, a consistently higher percentage of children diagnosed as LD came from low SES households” according to Child Trends Data Bank (2007) (as cited in Howard et al., 2009, p. 2). That data shows that low SES students are overrepresented not because they necessarily possess learning disabilities but because “their behaviors, learning styles, and attending patterns – which differ from those exhibited by middle- and upper-class White students – influence their inappropriate referral to special education” (p. 2).

Furthermore, just because a child receives special education services as mandated by IDEA, whether or not the child has a disability, his prospects for graduation are dismal: “in 2003, only 34% of exiting learning disabilities students received a diploma” (National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 40). Howard determined that “there does not appear to be a correlation between identifying a child for LD services and the likelihood that he/she will be successful in school with the extra services and the label” (p. 40). One reason for this lack of success is because special educators of students who are labeled as having learning disabilities focus on remediation rather than the actual cause of behaviors or poor school performance caused by poverty, homelessness, or home situations (Howard, 2007, p. 33). Furthermore, remediation may not help students, whether or not they are labeled as having a learning disability or not, because, according to a study by Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and McGue (1995), “both LD and low achievement students can benefit from the same types of intense instruction and the LD label may be unnecessary” (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 34).

Teachers must understand the often negative implications for recommending that a student receive special education for a possible learning disability until they have implemented

interventions to rule out any other possibilities. For example, teachers should ask themselves if the student in question is acting out because he is hungry or unsafe, if he doesn't have a home or family to return to, or if he is simply grade levels behind due to these factors and hasn't caught up. The differences that the teacher witnesses between the student in question and other students might also be due to his or her cultural or language differences. Teachers can learn to differentiate between students who have learning disabilities versus students showing signs caused by living in poverty by speaking with the child and parents and generally understanding the effects that poverty can have on a student. Referral to special education should be the last resort. Ferri and Connor (2005) found that, "as the school year progresses, referrals to special

education Howard et al. (2009) found that "a number of researchers have addressed the suggestion that teachers' referrals for LD testing are influenced more by low tolerance for negative behaviors than by students' lack of academic ability" (p. 23). In fact, almost half of all referrals for LD (in urban schools) are due to students' poor behaviors rather than academic performance (Gottlieb, 1985; Gottlieb & Alter, 1994, as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 49). This evidence suggests that teachers (a majority of whom are White, middle-class, and female) refer at least half of their students due to improper behavior management, which has nothing to do with students' academic abilities or whether or not they may have a learning disability. Before referring a student to special education, teachers should first reassess their behavior management philosophy and strategies. Ferri and Connor (2005) found that, "as the school year progresses, referrals to special

education Teachers and parents may view special education "as an easy method available to provide special instruction to a low-achieving child whose family cannot afford outside tutoring" (Howard, 2007, p. 49). If it is extra help that the child needs, then the teacher should provide tutoring or mentoring (discussed in the following pages); no child should be referred to special

education unless there is a high likelihood that he or she has an actual disability. Even if the teacher makes an incorrect referral either on purpose or by accident, the LD label is often applied and “few children exit from this track of education” (Howard, 2007, p. 49). In addition, in a study by Gottlieb, Gottlieb & Trongone (1991), they found that “88 percent of the students referred by teachers were found educationally disabled and found eligible for services” (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 53). Therefore, even if a teacher is mistaken in referring a child to special education for a learning disability, the child may still receive unnecessary and ineffective services.

Ferri and Connor (2005) found that, even more unjust than referring a child to special education to receive extra help, “some parents and educators ...use certain special education categories as a tool for continued racial segregation” due to their “white privilege and racialized conceptions of ability” (Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 57). For instance, a White parent or educator may believe that a child of color or of a low socio-economic status will bring down the achievement of other students, so they may try to remove the child from the classroom by means of a special education referral.

Gopaul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood (1998) and Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz (2005) identify three factors contributing to the over-representation of students of color in special education (as cited in Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 58): instructional factors, referral procedures, and assessment practices. Instructional factors include ineffective teaching methods (effective methods will be discussed in the following pages), lack of experienced or certified teachers, and teachers’ limited knowledge of the second language acquisition process. Some may argue that too many factors outside of school affect teachers’ abilities to effectively teach students at-risk, especially those who live in poverty. However, by simply improving

teaching practices, teachers can reach at-risk students much more effectively. Ineffective assessment practices include testing bias by not testing students in their native language if they don't speak English as their first language. Bias can be avoided by using an interpreter to aid the student or by giving the tests in students' native language. A combination of effective instruction, providing interventions before referring students to special education, and limiting bias in testing will do much to remove the over-representation of students who live in poverty and students of color from special education.

Parents

Teachers tend to find that parents of their students of low SES are not as active in their child's education as teachers would like. Problems in getting parents involved include teachers (who "have had little if any training in strategies for working collaboratively with families"), the school climate, and parents' abilities to devote time to their child's education (Howard et al., 2009, p. 57). First, teachers must not assume that because a parent does not come to school functions or help their child with homework that the parent does not care about education or their child. As Casanova (1996) wrote, "parents of low SES children rate the importance of education as a route to economic and social mobility highly" (as cited in Howard et al., 2009, p. 9). Therefore, parents should be viewed not as problems but as "potential problem solvers" (Furumoto, 2003, as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 34).

Parents may not be actively involved in school functions for several reasons. Lareau (1994) found that "lack of [parent] participation was not necessarily due to lack of concern for commitment. Poorer parents indicated they had less time and flexibility to meet parent involvement commitments" (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 38). Low SES parents will be more likely than middle- to upper-class parents to work more than one job and thus be less able to

attend school functions or help their children with homework after school (Howard et al., 2009, 57). In addition to time constraints, parents often do not feel welcomed in schools. According to Thomas-Presswood and Presswood (2008), “families living in poverty are more likely to have negative experiences with institutions exerting authority, which are carried over to school officials. Teachers and administrators reinforce this negative interaction with authority by not working collaboratively with parents.” (p. 172). Howard et al., explain that teachers should “acknowledge that most parents want to be there for their children” but are often deterred:

...parents’ perceptions of the teachers’ attitudes toward them and their circumstances can significantly affect their willingness to come to school and into the classroom. Self-consciousness about their level of education, command of the English language, or ability to pay for school supplies and proper clothing can also deter parents from coming to school. (p. 57)

In addition, parents’ lack of education or proficiency in English often leads parents to prefer that teachers the experts teach and help their children (Lareau 1994, as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 38).

Some suggestions for involving parents of low SES or homeless students include:

- Give parents options regarding times to have parent-teacher conferences.
- Give parents a list of families who live in their neighborhoods so they may carpool.
- Have parent-teacher conferences outside of the school at a local church or coffee shop that is more convenient for the parent (Howard et al., 2009, p. 64).

Kuykendall (2004) suggests that teachers shouldn’t have their first contact with students’ parents be for bad news such as their child misbehaving. Instead, “teachers should call parents early in the school year to share good news and favorable anticipation,” which will lessen

parents' anxiety about interacting with the teacher despite poor experiences with school and teachers previously (p. 179). If parents do not speak English, the teacher may find interpreters to help communicate. Interpreters may include the parents' child, other students, students from other classes who need volunteer hours, or individuals from local churches and universities (Howard et al., 2009, p. 66).

Knowing about students' families and living situations can lead to close parent-teacher relationships that will help teachers best educate their students. With frequent communication, teachers can ask parents for help in explaining how their children best learn or are motivated. Understanding the issues facing students and their families can help teachers adjust how he or she runs the classroom (from management to parent-teacher conferences) to fit the individual needs of the parents and students (Grant, Stronge, & Popp, 2008, p. 14).

Teachers' Impact

Despite the obstacles facing students, from homelessness and poverty to racism and busy parents, teachers can "have the power to override poverty" but only "with professional development" and effective instruction (Wenglinsky 2002, as cited in Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 5). But how effective can a teacher be when educating children who face such obstacles to learning and success? Grant et al. (2008) cite data from Dallas that shows that "if a student has a high performing teacher for just one year, the student will remain ahead of peers for at least a few years of schooling" (p. 3). On the other hand, the same study showed that "if a student has an ineffective teacher, the influence on student achievement is not fully remediated for up to three years" (p. 3).

To complicate the previous statements, Mitchell & Conn (1985) found that although "a negative teacher can discourage student development, an effective teacher can overcome the

negative impact of prior conditioning” (as cited in Kuykendall, 2004, p. 6). Kuykendall goes on to state that “in their endeavors to inspire and give hope, educators not only help to break such cycles of poverty, they can strengthen the human resolve of many poor students” (p. 23). While the evidence may be contradictory regarding how much impact an excellent teacher can have with students, all evidence shows that success with students from low SES families, no or little English language background, or homelessness is possible.

Importance of Teachers and Teacher Training

According to Grant et al. (2008), “effective teachers of at-risk students motivate students to learn, are enthusiastic about learning, provide a supportive environment, and exhibit supportive behaviors such as staying late, coming in early, and making a commitment to student success” (14). Performing duties such as staying after school to tutor are often necessary to help these students succeed, and a greater effort is often needed to successfully teach at-risk students compared to students who are middle- to upper-class and live in a safe, healthy, supportive environment. Perhaps this extra effort and time commitment is why teachers often shy away from teaching at-risk children. This extra effort must be expected and performed as part of the job if we wish for these students to succeed, for the fates of children’s school success lie with teachers.

Barton (2004) cites six factors that affect school achievement, and three of those factors have to do with teacher knowledge, abilities, and performance (as cited in Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 56). Those three factors include low-quality education instruction from the teacher, limited teacher experience, and inadequate teacher preparation. Therefore, a majority of the teacher-created roadblocks to student learning can be prevented with more effective teacher training and professional development aimed at specifically teaching at-risk, low SES students.

In fact, one of the reasons why the drop-out rate is so large for students labeled “at-risk” is because they are “more likely to be placed with less effective teachers. Thus, the neediest students are being instructed by the least capable teachers” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 4).

Although Grant et al. (2008) state that “nothing is more fundamentally important to improving America’s schools than improving the teaching that occurs every day in every classroom,” universities inadequately prepare teachers to instruct students who live in poverty or face other large societal barriers to success, such as racism (p. 3). Howard (2007) noted that many teachers whom she studied expressed frustration, believing that their universities had prepared them well to teach successfully only to find that strategies they had learned “did not apply to children missing so much of the essential background knowledge” (p. 178). Howard (2007) and Ng & Rury (2006a) also express frustration that, despite the enormous numbers of students living in poverty who are learning in and dropping out of America’s schools, teachers are not adequately trained to reach them (178; as cited in Smyth, et al., 2010, p. 23).

Boykin & Bailey (2000) found that “children’s chances of school achievement are higher when their teachers understand varying socio-cultural knowledge and consider it when they plan their lessons and format their classrooms” (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 51). Similarly, Kincheloe (2004) notes that in order to effectively teach at-risk students, teachers must “develop a deep understanding” of the issues they face and how to overcome them in the classroom,” which is not being provided when teachers are trained and certified (as cited in McKinney, Flenner, Frazier, & Adams, p. 2). Despite many studies revealing the importance of preparing all educators to teach this at-risk demographic, university certification programs are lagging behind, leaving teachers unprepared and unknowledgeable.

High Expectations

One way to help at-risk students have higher school achievement is to have high expectations and use their backgrounds to enrich their education. Tileston & Darling (2009) write that teachers often focus on the problems that students bring rather than their “assets” (p. 6). Benard (1996) also found that teacher education students who are mostly white and monolingual tend to view diversity of student backgrounds as a problem rather than a resource that enriches teaching and learning” (as cited in Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 24). As a result of low expectations, lack of understanding of the effects of poverty, and a fear of teaching students whose backgrounds differ from the teachers’, educators tend to “accept the inevitability of impending failure for children of poverty – these teachers exhibit deficit perceptions” (Howard et al., 2009, p. 10).

To reverse these negative assumptions about students who do not speak English or who live in poverty, “we must remind ourselves we’re *not* in school for *teaching*; we’re here for *learning*. Student learning is the only result that counts!” (Howard et al., 2009, p. 37). While poverty has terrible and lasting effects on students, and teachers cannot be burdened with the full responsibility of alleviating those negative effects, teachers certainly have the potential, with the right attitude, to help all students succeed. Indeed, teachers are not successful unless their students are, and if any students fail, then so, too, has the teacher.

Howard et al. (2009) also found that exemplary teachers of at-risk students “set high goals for all of their students, and once those goals are reached, they set higher ones. They approach low SES children’s economic barriers not as something wrong with the children, but as indicators of the support the children might need to succeed” (p. 35). Similarly, according to Fisher & Mathews (1999), “students benefited from an atmosphere of high expectations,” and Wahlage & Rutter (1986) found that “adult expectations of students were strong determinants in

predicting the youth that would drop out of school,” thus highlighting the enormous impact a teacher’s expectations can have on students (as cited in Grant et al., 2008, p. 17).

Meeting Basic Needs

B. The first step in teaching students who live in poverty, are homeless, or are in other unfortunate circumstances that negatively affect their abilities to succeed at school is to meet students’ basic needs. Maslow hypothesized that only once students’ basic needs are met (food, clothing, and shelter) will they be able to concentrate, learn, and perform well in school. (Grant et al., 2008, p. 20). To meet these basic needs, Yamaguchi et al. (1997) suggest that teachers create a clothes and school supplies closet in the school or one’s classroom (p. 96). To fund the materials, they suggest contacting “local churches, fraternities, sororities, and other philanthropic organizations for donations” (96). They also recommend that teachers learn about community services where students and their families can receive free food, clothing, and school supplies (p. 96).

As mentioned previously, parents sometimes do not wish to meet with teachers or come to school functions because they are embarrassed by their lack of education or English speaking abilities. Similarly, parents may also be embarrassed to meet with teachers when their children do not have enough food, clothing, or school supplies. Teachers must be sensitive that parents may not be able to “contribute snacks for school parties, pay for field trips, or buy school supplies” (Yamaguchi et al., 1997, p. 94). A way to reduce this stigma for parents and students is to have a supplies closet available to students who need it. Other ideas include asking the PTA to cover the cost of students’ lunches until the application for free or reduced lunch (with which non-native English speakers may struggle) is processed and asking grocery stores to sponsor a

snack program so no parents must pay (Howard et al., 2009, p. 51; Yamaguchi et al., 1997, p. 96).

When meeting the needs of students who live in poverty, teachers are not alone. The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 mandates that each district has a homeless liaison “designed to ensure that children who are homeless receive educational services for which they are eligible and coordinate with special services agencies for appropriate referrals” (Yamaguchi et al., 1997, p. 91). This liaison can be useful in working with teachers to make sure students’ basic needs are met.

Extra Help for Students

Because low SES students are often academically behind their more wealthy peers, they could benefit from extra tutoring that parents may not be able to do if they are not proficient in the language, do not have enough education, or are absent due to work, other commitments, or incarceration. Howard et al. (2009) recommend that teachers make themselves available at the end of the day for students who need assistance with homework or need extra tutoring (p. 51). Teachers may also wish to start clubs (such as a film or book club) to make up for the lack of educational resources at students’ homes (65). Teachers may also arrange (with parent permission) that another parent give other children rides home if their parents cannot pick them up so that they may participate in after-school activities (51).

Many students who live in poverty may not have their own computers for homework and research. Howard et al. (2009) suggest teachers ask businesses to donate old technology for use in the classroom or individual homes (65).

Using Students’ Background and Knowledge

As with all students, teachers should use children's background knowledge and expertise to guide lessons, because "whenever students are involved in reflection on their own lives and how they have come to believe and feel as they do, good teaching is going on" (Haberman, 1991, p. 7). Students will inherently be more involved with lessons if the subjects reflect upon their own lives. Furthermore, when students are given a voice and an opportunity to share what they know, they will feel validated and successful.

Morrell (2002) suggests using popular culture, such as hip-hop music, in the classroom. Rap, he believes, can be "a voice of resistance for urban youth" that can be combined with film and literature (as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 125). In essence, teachers should capitalize on what students already know and are interested in so that students will be more invested and find school relevant to their lives. Teachers may use "KWLs" to learn about students' background knowledge as well (Howard et al., 39). KWL stands for *know*, *want to know* or *wonder*, and *learned*. Before beginning a new lesson or unit, students say or write (as a class or individually) what they already know about the subject and what they wish to learn. When the lesson or unit is complete, students list what they have learned and how that compared to what they knew. By having students vocalize what they want to learn, the teacher can make sure the lessons cover what interests students.

Cushman (2003) provides a sample questionnaire for students in her book *Fires in the bathroom: Advice for teachers from high school students* that includes questions such as languages spoken at students' homes, where they were born, interests and activities, feelings about school and homework, and other questions that help inform teachers of a students' background knowledge and living situations (p. 9-11). Teachers can easily create their own

questionnaires for students based on information that is relevant to the population, age, and subject being taught.

Like using students' background knowledge and interests to guide the teaching process, educators should also view students' "culture...as an area of expertise that can be used as a springboard for learning in all content areas," such as their language, cultural practices, and beliefs (Dieckmann, 2001, as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 49). What is important to students is, in fact "determined by their culture" and "understanding their cultural context will help you to identify what is significant to your students" (Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 21). Unfortunately, many textbooks teachers must use do not include stories about diverse individuals and focus on White, middle- to upper-class people. Kuykendall (2004) believes that "institutional racism can be reduced through efforts to increase teacher expectations and by providing tests and textbooks that accurately represent all ethnic and multicultural groups" (p. 53). If students are not taught through texts and lessons that their culture, beliefs, or languages are valued, then they are less likely to be invested in education and society.

Focusing on Students' Strengths

Teachers might find it useful to concentrate on students' strengths that help rather than hinder the teaching process. Kuykendall (2004) suggests that every teacher put three adjectives that describe three nonacademic strengths next to each child's name in the roll book (p. 104). These words are reminders to incorporate those strengths into lessons and to complement students frequently even if they are not exhibiting academic strengths. For example, students who are chatty might enjoy being on a debate team or giving a speech to the class or school. After all, "modifying and adapting instruction to meet student needs was a significant predictor of student achievement" (Grant et al., 2008, p. 20).

Effective Teaching Methods

A great deal of research has shown that some teaching methods and practices are more effective for helping at-risk students succeed in the classroom. Howard (2007) found that the following components were necessary for teachers to use:

- Transitions between subjects and classes are smooth.
- Schedules and consequences are consistent.
- Teacher responds to students positively rather than negatively.
- To reduce behavior problems, the teacher increases proximity to the students acting out.
- The time structure is tight in that there is no downtime and the teacher is prepared to transfer into new lessons and activities.
- The teacher uses humor.
- The teacher is flexible when changes to the schedule or lesson must be made.
- Students' achievements are celebrated (p. 155).

Teachers of at-risk students and students who are behind in their work teach with a sense of urgency where instructional time is highly valued and teachers are on task every minute (Grant et al., 2008, p. 17).

All students, not just those who are at-risk for low achievement and dropping out of school, learn more and are more invested in their education when they are challenged. Taylor et al. (2003) reveals that "the more teachers focused on higher level questions, the better students performed in reading" in high poverty schools (as cited in Grant et al., 2008, p. 18). Levin & Hopfenberg (1991) similarly found that "accelerated and enriched curriculum has been shown to lead to higher achievement for all children" (as cited in Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 147). Students are also more invested in school activities when teachers "focus on meaningful

connections rather than isolated facts and ideas,” and students performed better when teachers focused on teaching reasoning over the memorization of facts” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 18).

An example of assignments focused on reasoning and relevancy includes allowing students to do service learning in the community. Students also tend to respond well when they are focused on solving real-life problems in their lives, schools, or communities. No matter the subject, as long as students are involved in relevant problem solving, they will likely learn more than if they are forced to be passive learners. After all, “school is living, not preparation is living” (Haberman, 1991, p. 5).

Cooperative and Democratic Learning

Creating a classroom environment in which students collaborate with one another and have their say in what and how they learn has been shown to be effective in teaching at-risk students. Cooperative learning can be defined as “encouraging children to learn together and...fostering opportunities for team effort” in which “children teach each other within the context of structured and small-group dynamic activities” (Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 127). Slavin (1988) defined the necessary components of cooperative learning as having classroom rewards, group goals and individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success (as cited in Thomas-Presswood & Presswood 2008, p. 127). Rewards and goals motivate students (extrinsically and intrinsically) while accountability requires and teaches responsibility, and equal opportunities to engage ensure all students feel included and valued.

Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante (1995) wrote that migrant and homeless children may particularly benefit from cooperative learning because “students encourage and support others” (as cited in Grant et al., 2008, p. 17). Furthermore, when students are working on projects that include hands-on activities and cooperation, their academic achievement increases, not just for

students at-risk (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2002, as cited in Grant et al., 2008, p.

17). Some characteristics of cooperative learning include:

- Peer tutoring.
- Student mentoring programs (Tileston & Darling (2009).
- Students working together.
- Group projects and research.
- Students have a say in what they contribute to the group (Smyth, et al., 2010, p. 46).

Democratic learning is similar to cooperative learning in that students assist each other and are actively engaged. The difference is that democratic learning has a greater focus on students being involved in the teaching and learning process. Students are able to make choices about how and what they learn and to then teach one another (Howard, 2007, p. 159-60).

Students, particularly those at-risk, benefit from democratic and cooperative learning.

Tutors and Mentors

Having tutors or mentors for students at-risk can hugely impact their success in school and is an important component of cooperative learning. Tutors can be distinguished from mentors in that tutors are solely responsible for helping others with academic work while mentors might help with academics but also recreational and other miscellaneous, supportive activities. Tutors or mentors might be older students from the same school, college students, or adults from the community (Snow, 2005, p. 46). When using tutors or mentors, they must be trained before working with students, and they must often check in with the teacher or person in charge (Snow, 2005, p. 52). Training will ensure that the tutors or mentors will have the right attitude and tools, while frequent check-ins help them assess students' levels of achievement to adapt curriculum, activities, or books when needed. Giving at-risk students a mentor or tutor is

likely to have a great impact on them because they will receive needed individual attention and a chance for the student to become close with a trusted adult.

In addition to training tutors, Wasik & Slavin (1993) identify two other necessary components to successful tutoring: instruction is of high quality and the amount of time spent in tutoring matches students' needs (as cited in Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, p. 128). Training the tutors and checking in with them frequently will help ensure that instruction is of high quality. Spending enough time with the tutee may mean that the instructor spends one or more hours, three or more times per week, which is a significant amount of time for busy teachers or fellow students. Therefore, teachers may assign one student (peer, older student, or college student), community adult, or professional instructor per child so that enough time may be spent with the struggling student and not overwhelm the tutor.

Using Technology

According to Day (2002), "integrating technology has also been associated with better academic achievement of at-risk students" (as cited in Grant et al., 2008, p. 17). Today's children respond well to technology and often use it as an everyday part of their lives. Allowing students to use these electronics (rather than banning them) in lessons will likely engage students and allow them to bring their expertise into the classroom. Using virtual educational games, videos, and other virtual applications (drawing tools, graphing programs) will be a welcome break from using paper-based texts all day.

Confidence and Success

Building upon and using students' knowledge of media and technology will allow some children to build their confidence in their abilities to succeed academically. After all, "the best way to build the confidence children need to overcome academic shortcomings is to build

students' nonacademic strengths. Teachers are able to provide opportunities for...students to experience success in *something* when they know their strengths, capabilities, and competencies" (Kuykendall, 2004, p. 104). Teachers of secondary students will have many children with experience with academic failure due to poor instruction, with inexperienced teachers and their low expectations, and with external factors that accompany children who live in poverty. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to build up students' self-confidence and motivation to help them succeed.

Some teachers of low-achieving students may "water down" the curriculum so that students may experience success. However, Tileston & Darling (2009) found that "providing a curriculum without rigor does not lead to greater self-esteem or to self-efficacy" because students know they are behind grade level and behind the achievements of their peers (p. 21). Furthermore, by not giving all students a rigorous education, they will not be prepared for future grades or success in life. When teachers challenge students, including those who lag behind their peers, students must know that failure is a learning experience. To show students that the teacher believes in them and that failure is a necessary part of learning, the teacher must communicate that, in the end, each child will succeed because the teacher will not let them fail (Howard, 1987, as cited in Kuykendall, 2004, p. 108). By doing so, students feel supported, learn to not fear failure, and learn persistence and resiliency.

When work is difficult or an assigned project has many parts, the assignment should be broken into "manageable segments that can be completed in short periods to give children a feeling of accomplishment" (Yamaguchi et al., 1997, p. 95). Showing students' progress over time (based on formative assessments) can help students see how they have improved. Even if a

student fails an assessment, showing them how they missed fewer questions than previously can help them realize their growth, no matter how small.

Ortiz & Yates (1984) lament that teachers sometimes don't understand the effects that poverty or other negative life situations can have on students' learning styles: "some children fail to perceive their own effort as an important cause of success or failure" (as cited in Howard, 2007, p. 45)." They go on to write that "these students will not be successful unless they are taught using strategies compatible with their own cognitive orientations. These strategies include goal setting, sequencing behavior, and intrinsic motivation" (p. 45). Students must be explicitly taught to set a reachable goal with steps to accomplish it. Once they are motivated to reach their goals, students will likely find motivation within themselves to challenge themselves and monitor their own behavior so that they may succeed.

Resiliency

Resilient students from all backgrounds have a greater chance of being successful academically and in life because they are able to "bound back" from their setbacks and failures. For students who live in poverty and are labeled "at-risk" for these types of failures, resiliency is key. Teachers play an important part because they "have the power to contribute substantially to the emotional adjustment and well-being of children living in poverty when they provide an atmosphere that fosters resiliency" (Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 134). Schools and teachers can foster this resiliency by:

- Allowing students to focus on learning (by providing them with food and necessarily school supplies).
- Making children feel valued and safe by having adults who care for and are trained to tend to their needs.
- Promoting high academic and behavioral expectations (Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008, p. 134).

Doll et al. (2004) also define six characteristics of resilient classrooms:

- Academic efficacy
 - Students are challenged.
 - Students receive positive feedback on their behavior and assignments.
 - Successes are celebrated.
- Academic self-determination
 - Students set personal goals.
- Behavioral self-control
 - Children understand the effects their actions have on others and seek to control their own behavior.
- Effective peer relationships
 - Students collaborate, maintain friendships, and manage conflicts.
- Effective teacher-student relationships
 - Teacher cares for the student and understands each child's learning strengths and weaknesses.
 - Students trust that the teacher will help them succeed.
- Effective home-school relationships
 - Teacher has positive and frequent communication with students' parents and guardians.

Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer (2003) found that frequent, appropriate feedback “may have special significance for children from low SES environments” because children from middle- to upper-class backgrounds receive “32 affirmative replies for every 5 disapprovals” or 6:1. Children from low SES backgrounds “hear 5 affirmations for every 11 disapprovals” or 1:2 (as cited in Howard et al., 2009, p. 47). Teachers should celebrate all successes to show students that each one of them is important and appreciated (Howard et al., 2009, p. 53). Feedback should be positive and give suggestions for improvement with a focus on what students are able to accomplish without being overwhelmed.

Assessment

Exemplary teachers of at-risk students use assessment as “fuel for planning” and not as a summary of what students learned only at the end of a unit when the results cannot alter the teacher’s planning or students’ chances to improve (Grant et al., 2008, p. 51). Assessment should be used to gauge where students’ abilities lie so that teachers can use that information to “support and guide their instruction” (Howard et al., 2009, p. 35). Smyth et al. (2010) write that assessments should incorporate different ways for students to show what they have learned by assessing oral and written skills through “multimedia, group presentations, experiments, performances, and exhibitions” (p. 204).

Portfolios of students’ work, growth, and abilities have proved to be useful for both teachers and students. Portfolios help students, teachers, and parents see how individuals have improved and serve as a tool for the child’s next teachers to use to plan individual instruction (Howard et al., 2009, p. 35). Even if portfolios are not used in one’s school or classroom, to help each teacher “hit the ground running” at the beginning of each year or term, teachers should communicate with fellow educators the strengths and weaknesses of students with whom they have expertise so that no teacher must start from scratch in getting to know how to best serve his or her students.

Teaching Their History

As mentioned previously, even if Hispanic and Black students graduate from high school and obtain college degrees, they are much less likely than White individuals to be employed and not live in poverty. Kuykendall (2004) writes that many Black and Hispanic students don’t feel as though they can “make it ‘legitimately’ in a society they feel is against them” (p. 5). Similarly, Cheyney, Fine, & Ravitch (1987) found that “when youth are denied their history, they are

unlikely to realize their full potential” (as cited in Kuykendall, 2004, p. 31). That is to say, non-White students are not being taught their own history, where they come from, and, most of all, why so many of them are not succeeding in American society. Instead, many non-White students assume they are destined to fail in a society that doesn’t understand or want them.

James Loewen (1996) analyzed American history textbooks and found that “the notion that opportunity might be unequal in America, that not everyone has ‘the power to rise in the world,’ is anathema to textbook authors, and to many teachers as well” (p. 34). Osei-Kofi (2005) also found that textbooks and teachers often “take on the entrenched meritocratic myth that anyone can succeed provided they exercise ‘the right amount of drive, dedication and smarts’ and that with a few exceptions, all failings are individualistic” (as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 22). Instead, students are taught that one fails because he or she did not try hard enough, which then blames those who live in poverty or those who come from broken homes and neighborhoods for their lack of success in school, work, and life.

Teachers may not wish to teach about class, racism, or other reasons why some people are less likely and able to live the “American Dream” so that they do not embarrass their students. Loewen (1996) found the opposite to be true:

(207). Taking both statements together, however, we find that when my students from non-affluent backgrounds learn about the class system, they find the experience liberating. Once they see the social processes that have helped keep their families poor, they can let go of their negative self-image about being poor. Knowledge of the social-class system also reduces the tendency of Americans from other social classes to blame the victim for being poor. (p. 207)

Here, Loewen highlights the importance of teaching all students, no matter their background, about social class. Because everyone is inherently affected by their social class, students will likely take interest in this topic. As explained previously, students are often more invested when they are involved in learning about subjects that have relevancy to them.

Teachers may also fear making White children feel guilty for the racism and classism society exercises over people of color. In an interview with Enid Lee, she says, “perhaps a sense of being threatened or feeling guilty may occur. But I think it is possible to have kids move beyond that” (Bigelow, 1994, p. 21). She suggests that White and/or upper- to middle-class students don’t have to feel guilty or not represented in one’s classroom because there are many “white people who have fought against racism and social injustice (Bigelow, 1994, p. 21).

Teachers must take care to not marginalize or have a bias towards privileged or underprivileged students in the course of celebrating multiculturalism and exposing racism, classism, sexism, and other biases.

To contradict Kuykendall (2004) for highlighting Black and Hispanic students from feeling misunderstood by society, Loewen (1996) states that “more than any other group, white working-class students believe that they deserve their low status. A subculture of shame results” (207). Taking both statements together, however, teachers should understand that teaching of social class and privilege is vital for the education of *all* students. Poverty is not just an issue of skin color or the neighborhood in which one grew up. The result of not teaching about social class and poverty is that students drop out of school. Then, “when these students react by dropping out, intellectually if not physically, their poor school performance helps convince them as well as their peers in the faster tracks that the system is meritocratic and that they themselves

lack merit (Loewen, 1996, p. 213). It is the duty of teachers, then, to break this cycle of ignorance and self-blame.

The solution to ending this cycle of the failure of America's poor and "at-risk" children and youth is to teach "liberating pedagogies" which "develop in students a critical consciousness about the world, an understanding of their place in it, and how they might change things for the better" (Kincheloe, 2009, as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 128). Students are taught not to accept how society exists but to challenge it and to "believe that this is not all natural" (Zinn, 2005, as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 129-130). Furthermore, topics such as race, class, and gender must be part of all curricula (Furumoto, 2003, as cited in Smyth et al., 2010, p. 35). By teaching such subjects and allowing students to share what they know and challenge what they feel is wrong, students will be both invested in their education and understand their own history and background so that they do not blame themselves for all that may have held them back.

Teachers must not underestimate the impact they can have on their students despite societal and familial pressures that may be out of their control. Teachers who are well-trained to educate "at-risk" students will know how to formatively assess students, teach to students' strengths, help them set goals and learn resiliency, and connect with parents and community resources. Teachers must not focus on the problems students bring to class but on the success they may have with the right support and teaching methods.

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Resources

Bigelow, B., Christensen, L., Karp, S., Miner, B., & Peterson, B. (Eds.). (1994). *Rethinking our classrooms: Teaching for equity and justice* (Vol. 1). Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Ltd.

Bigelow, B., Harvey, B., Karp, S., & Miller, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Rethinking our classrooms: Teaching for equity and justice* (Vol. 1). Williston, VT: Rethinking School, Ltd.

Rethinking Our Classrooms volume 1 and 2 contain articles about teaching to include and validate all children. It also contains poetry, ways to format your classroom for equity, and lists of books about race, class, and other touchy subjects for children of all ages. It also includes resources for teachers to teach multiculturally.

Chappuis, J. (2009). *Seven strategies of assessment for learning*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

This book provides excellent examples and resources for guiding students to create and reach their academic goals. It also walks teachers through the process of formatively assessing students so that students learn from each piece of work they produce and eventually learn to assess themselves.

Christensen, L. (2009). *Teaching for joy and justice: Re-imagining the language arts classroom*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Ltd.

From the folks who brought you *Rethinking Our Schools*, this book focuses on highlighting and using students' backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences in the English language arts classroom.

Collins, C., Yeskel, F., & United For a Fair Economy (2000). *Economic apartheid in America: A primer on economic inequality & insecurity*. New York, NY: The New Press.

This book is an excellent introduction about economic inequity in America and also contains visuals that may be used in middle through high school classes. It examines the causes and effects of inequity and will help students not blame the poor for their conditions.

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

This book is a good starting place and refresher about the effects of poverty and what schools/teachers can do.

Lee, E., Menkart, D., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2008). *Beyond heroes and holidays: A practical guide to k-12 anti-racist, multicultural education and staff development*. Washington, DC: Teaching for Change.

This publication contains articles, resources, and lesson plans for creating a multicultural, all-inclusive classroom that is welcoming to parents, the community, and students.

<http://www.anxiouseducator.wordpress.com>

My honors paper will be uploaded to my blog (see above web address) by the end of the quarter.

<http://www.classism.org/resources>

Classism.org provides many resources for learning about classism and provides a link, "Resources for Children," with a list of books appropriate for all ages that covers class, poverty, and homelessness for elementary through high school age.

<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/teachers.html>

EdChange is a website with many resources to help educators teach curriculum that will reach all students. Resources include quizzes about multicultural education, class, poverty, and sexism, downloadable handouts, and more, all geared towards teachers.

www.pbs.org/race

Hosted by PBS, this website has a section for teachers which contains lesson plans that focus on race. All lessons are for high school and fit into most subjects.

<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/issues-poverty>

This link is to four middle and high school English and social studies lessons through the Teaching Tolerance website. Lessons help students understand unemployment, what poverty means and why people become poor, the cycle of poverty, and race's role in poverty.

<http://zinnedproject.org/>

The Zinn Education Project is a website with excellent history lessons that reveal the accomplishments of history's heroes who are often left out of textbooks and classrooms. Lessons are specific to time periods and themes.